

Early Vancouver

Volume Seven

By: Major J.S. Matthews, V.D.

2011 Edition (Originally Published 1956)

Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected between 1931-1956.

About the 2011 Edition

The 2011 edition is a transcription of the original work collected and published by Major Matthews. Handwritten marginalia and corrections Matthews made to his text over the years have been incorporated and some typographical errors have been corrected, but no other editorial work has been undertaken. The edition and its online presentation was produced by the City of Vancouver Archives to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the City's founding. The project was made possible by funding from the Vancouver Historical Society.

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Linn' Cottage at Lynn Creek, circa 1896. At a time when there were few places near Vancouver where a picnic could be held. John Linn, Royal Engineer, 1859, was granted, for military services, District Lot 204, east bank, Lynn Creek, 150 acres, 10th Feb. 1871. The Linn built this cottage, 1869. It stood about fifty feet from the stream, near its mouth, & faced the Second Narrows. He died 18th April 1876. M^{rs} Linn, widow, sold it for \$21,000. She died 10th June 1907. In its early days it was a pretty well kept home for themselves and six children. For further description see Out. P. 624, N. 231, S. E. N. 1038 and other photos. Out. P. 214, N. 230, 231. Observe man with oars. Also Chinese lanterns, several tents not visible. This photo is Out 214 P, S. E. N. 357. City Archives. J. S. M.

[photo annotation:]

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THE VANCOUVER DAILY PROVINCE, B.C. MAGAZINE, SATURDAY 27 OCTOBER 1951.

THE MAJOR

FIERY WATCHDOG OF OUR HISTORY.

By Ron Thornbur.

A black derby or panama, a cane or black umbrella, depending upon the turn of weather or season, a worn brown suitcase and an air of dogged purpose, all borne along by a sturdy figure which every weekday morning marches with a military step across the intersection of Cambie and Twelfth. These are the identifying features of one of the most colorful and controversial personalities at City Hall and in Vancouver's public life.

Major James Skitt Matthews, V.D., city archivist and sometimes holy terror, is a man who puts a tremendous single energy into living and a man about whom few persons can hold a neutral opinion after having met him. Almost single-handedly, he has gathered about him all that is known and authenticated as to the history of Vancouver. He has devoted 30 years of his life to tracking and pinning down what remains to be known. A brilliant mind, he is a living encyclopaedia of historical fact and legend—and no man to cross.

"The major," as he is best known to thousands, is old only in years. He is 73, but is never referred to as "old" Major Matthews. Fiery-tempered on occasion (and there have been many), he is a gentleman of a school and period almost forgotten today. He believes still that the greatest courtesy and tribute that can be paid to a woman is to bow and kiss her hand, and is proud to put his belief to frequent practice. A man with a terrific imagination, he acts out happily vignettes of city history. He has been known to snatch an old muzzle-loader from the wall and creep over the floor of the archives to bring to life some exciting episode with appropriate shouts, cries and gesticulations.

A former mayor of Vancouver, after a brisk run-in with the peppery archivist, once said the major could "charm a halo away from a saint or out-argue the devil himself." In fact, the major's standing with top civic officials is not too happy a one. He once had to wait three months for approval to purchase one new filing cabinet, and has been waiting four months now for report from Ald. Anna Sprott and Ald. Archie Proctor that may well decide his future at City Hall.

Sifting Legends.

In the meantime, he works on in his beloved archives on the ninth floor. To the major, history does not exist as history until facts are sifted from legend and methodically set down in book or filing cabinet. Because of his indefatigable pursuit of facts, the whole history of this city can be reconstructed piece by piece from the day in 1792 when Captain George Vancouver first entered Burrard Inlet.

The archives, crammed and stuffed with filing cabinets, showcases, books, chests, back copies of newspapers and a huge bust of Mussolini scowling at the wall, contain as basic reference material more than 7500 docketts, each containing scores of clippings, and at least 8000 priceless photographs and negatives.

Information available only from the archives' files has gone to every section of the globe, and few newspaper or magazine articles relating to Vancouver or her early pioneers have been published that have not found their source in the banks of filing cabinets.

Curiously enough, the first object to find its way into the city archives was the body of a long-defunct pigeon. This was in 1931 when the major was granted use of a garret over the old city market at Hastings and Main. He described it then as the "dirtiest room in British Columbia." It had not heat, light or water. A hole in the floor, covered by a loose board, looked down on a toilet below. The pigeon, many years previous, had found its way into the room, but never found its way out.

The major, at that time, had no official standing or salary. His first filing cabinet was a cardboard box. When colder weather came, he put on an extra sweater, another pair of socks, a heavy overcoat and kept on working. In 1933, he was appointed city archivist by City Council on that day and was granted an honorarium of \$25 per month. His embryo archives were moved into a tiny room on the tenth floor of the old City Hall—and the major kept on working.

Today, the archives department operates on an annual budget of \$6000 and in quarters far removed from and better than the "pigeon room" of 1931, but both allocation and location are still woefully inadequate. Out of his appropriation, the major is required to pay his own salary (about \$250 per month), operating expenses and, if he can, the salary of an assistant. He has been without a full-time assistant for the past year due to lack of sufficient funds.

Maj. Matthews' military career (he joined the "Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles," Sixth Regiment, here in 1903, rising to command by 1913) has left an indelible stamp upon him. It has left him with a brusqueness of manner that strangers often mistake as impatience. He is impatient only with those who he feels are wasting his time, but to answer one intelligent question he will cheerfully spend hours wreaking havoc upon his files.

Slightly hard of hearing as result of being wounded Oct. 20, 1916, in the assault and capture of Regina Trench at Ypres, the major likes people to "speak up."

History Lives.

Vancouver's colorful history is to him a deep and personal thing, something quite alive and vibrant. He has lived most of what he has given the better part of his life to documenting, and to the endless task brings the earnestness and sincerity of a novice for the priesthood. His enthusiasm is boundless. Hardly a night goes by that the light in his study in his home at 1158 Arbutus is turned out before 1 or 2 a.m. He spends countless hours poring over the daily newspapers and carefully clipping out at least 40 articles per day of current or historical interest.

Maj. Matthews came to Vancouver in 1898, traveling steerage in the old R.M.S. *Alameda* from Auckland, New Zealand, where he arrived from his birthplace, Montgomeryshire, Wales, in 1887 with his parents.

He recalls vividly cutting firewood in a clearing west of Burrard, picking blackberries on Davie. As one of the original B.C. employees of the Imperial Oil Company, he remembers well selling the first can of gas to the first automobile owner in this province, and putting forward the suggestion that led to establishment here of the first service station in North America.

The blackest event in the major's life was the death of his wife, November 2, 1948. Together, starting the task as a hobby long before they conceived the idea of establishing the city archives, they gathered about them, and at their own expense, many of the priceless items and records that are found here today. Rarely in life were to be found two persons so intensely devoted to each other as were the major and his wife, Emily, Royal Red Cross, and one of the first five nurses to graduate in Vancouver.